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DE RUEHNR #2446/01 1631304
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 121304Z JUN 07
FM AMEMBASSY NAIROBI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0303
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 9363
RUEHDR/AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM 5324
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 4739
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 2101
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2288
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2237
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHMFISS/CJTF HOA

C O N F I D E N T I A L NAIROBI 002446

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/11/2027
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [KE](#)
SUBJECT: KANU NATIONAL CONFERENCE: KENYATTA HOLDS HIS GROUND

REF: 06 NAIROBI 5099

Classified By: Political Counselor Larry Andre for reasons
1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Amid ongoing debate about the party's position within the opposition coalition and an internal power struggle, KANU held its National Delegates' Conference in Nairobi on June 11. According to KANU officials, the meeting was a success as the party made clear its position with respect to the coalition and upcoming general elections. It was also a strong showing for KANU's Chairman, Uhuru Kenyatta, who demonstrated he is firmly at the party's helm.
END SUMMARY.

KANU: Still Orange...For Now

¶2. (SBU) Kenya's first political party, KANU, held its National Delegates Conference on June 11 in Nairobi at a time when the party is facing both external and internal challenges: within the opposition coalition Orange Democratic Movement-Kenya (ODM-K) for "respect" of its corporate status, and within KANU itself to retain leadership of the party. The conference was widely speculated to be the forum at which KANU Chairman Uhuru Kenyatta would announce his intention to withdraw the party from ODM-K. He did not. He did however, make clear that KANU remains an independent and intact party, the real goal of the conference, according to one KANU official.

¶3. (C) Opposition Chief Whip and KANU MP Justin Muturi told poloff on June 12 that the conference was a success, having resolved that the party will not "merge" with ODM-K. "Our partners in ODM-K need to understand KANU is not dissolving," Muturi explained. The other significant development, he added, was the decision that KANU will run contestants for parliamentary seats as KANU, not ODM-K, candidates. According to Muturi, Kenyatta's vision for the party is that it will cooperate with ODM-K in a pre-election arrangement in which KANU agrees to support a single candidate for president. After that individual wins State House, the partners share out key government positions. Kenyatta will reiterate this position at the next ODM-K National Executive Council meeting on June 16, Muturi noted.

¶4. (SBU) Media reports had speculated that KANU would resolve during the conference to support just one party candidate for president, choosing between Kenyatta and KANU Secretary General William Ruto. This was not addressed

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during the meeting, however. Ruto and all of the other declared ODM-K candidates, except for Kenyatta, have officially entered their names in the coalition party's nomination race. The latest deadline for submitting nomination documents is Friday, June 15.

Sharp Words for ODM-K

15. (C) During his remarks at the conference, Kenyatta doubted that the ODM-K presidential nomination process would be free and fair. Muturi confirmed KANU suspicion of ODM-K leaders, in particular presidential hopeful Raila Odinga, commenting that Odinga demands that ODM-K members leave their old parties behind. "If he does not like KANU's approach, we will call it quits," he stated. Muturi explained that KANU members are "uncomfortable" with Odinga's leadership style in which he controls his party's MPs. Asked what the initial reaction from other ODM-K partners has been to Kenyatta's statement on June 11, Muturi remarked that they (Odinga and his supporters) feel "stung."

16. (SBU) While Kenyatta spoke to over 4,000 delegates in Nairobi, his rival for the party's leadership, MP Nicholas Biwott questioned the legitimacy of the meeting. Speaking to the media, Biwott chastised Kenyatta for convening a national meeting while KANU's organizational fate is pending in court.

(NOTE: This refers to the attempt in late 2006 by Biwott and his supporters to hijack KANU on the grounds that Kenyatta did not have the authority to bring KANU into a coalition (reftel). The move was widely believed to have been orchestrated by former President Moi, who vehemently opposes coalition with ODM-K. An interim court decision allowed Kenyatta to remain chairman pending an overall ruling, which is not likely to be made anytime soon. END NOTE.)

Comment: Fighting on Two Fronts, but Holding His Own

17. (C) Some observers see Kenyatta's pledge to keep KANU intact while it "cooperates" with ODM-K as a survival tactic. It allows him a party with which to run for president should he not get the ODM-K nomination. With speculation that he cannot even win his own parliamentary seat, Kenyatta has to do what he must to save his political life. His constituency is solidly Kikuyu - a population that generally does not view Raila Odinga's ODM-K kindly. Nonetheless, he gave a strong showing at the KANU conference, demonstrating that he is fully in control of his party, and that it will not be dictated to by Odinga. Elements of his June 11 speech which conjured KANU's glorious freedom struggle past may have helped Kenyatta reinspire support among his constituents. END COMMENT.

RANNEBERGER